

## Tough Q&A

**Q: *Why are so many more of Washington schools failing when we have been at education reform for the last 10 years? What does that say about our reform efforts in this state?***

A: The increase in the number of schools identified as not meeting AYP or “in need of improvement” has to do with the changes in the federal law, “No Child Left Behind (NCLB).” The new requirements pinpoint some learning challenges that schools must address when the assessment data is reported. Some schools’ learning challenges involve students who are in special education programs or students who are still learning English. Other schools have more severe learning challenges that cut across several groups of students. It is up to schools, districts, communities and the state to work together to figure out how to reach these students. We believe that all students, given appropriate time, assistance and resources, can meet the standards.

**Q: *People complain that our students are already over-tested. Won’t the new assessments under NCLB just make this worse?***

A: WASL testing takes approximately 2 weeks a year. Starting in 2005-06, annual WASL assessments will be in place for grades 3-8 and 10. Schools, districts and the state should look carefully at other assessments to determine what is essential and what can be eliminated to remove redundancies.

**Q: *Is it realistic to have all students at standard by 2014?***

A: We won’t know until we try. This is a tough and ambitious goal, but it is the right thing to target: all children learning at high levels. Our challenge in this next decade of reform, and especially under NCLB, will be to ensure that schools’ successes and best practices are shared more broadly and in a more systematic way.

**Q: *The state just made big cuts to education this last legislative session while the demands on schools are going up dramatically under NCLB. Isn’t this a train wreck waiting to happen?***

A: Washington received more than \$493 million in federal education funding in Fiscal Year 2002-2003 and expects to receive \$543 million in 2003-2004—an increase of over \$50 million. It’s true that schools are being asked to do more, and though there are increases, there is not enough to support all the needs. We need to make the best use of the funding that is provided and continue to target the learning needs unique to every student, school, and district.

**Q: *Is it realistic to have students with special needs and English Language Learning students judged to the same standard as other students?***

A: For too long, our system set different standards for different students. Now, the system expects the same of all students. What varies is *how* the students are taught and the *extra time* that students may need to achieve. Special education students and English language learners may need extra time and supports. Some special education students also need different testing formats and accommodations, and our system provides that, too. We need to ensure that NCLB has flexibility for students with special needs based on their IEPs. However, it is very important that they be included in the accountability system in an appropriate way.

**Q: *Are schools penalized if they have high levels of student turnover?***

A: No. The law appropriately recognizes that schools can only reach the students they have been teaching consistently. So while virtually all students are tested and their scores are reported, only those students who have been continuously enrolled since October 1 are included each year in the school’s AYP calculations.

**Q: *Isn’t labeling these schools “in need of improvement” just a word game to save face? Why don’t you call a failure a failure?***

A: Schools identified in need of improvement are just that – schools in need of improvement. That means we need to do a better job targeting resources and assistance to the students and staff in those schools to help them succeed. Calling them a failure doesn’t improve the situation. Greater community and parental involvement of students and staff will help support their efforts to improve student learning.